

Like a goth
Vox Phantom
crossed with
an LP Jr



Clean, stylish, radical, handmade – and it's not from Sweden or Finland, but Bristol. Huw Price examines a brand-new contender that sounds just as juicy as it looks

Blackspot

SC Guitar

Patrick Alexander made his first guitar at the tender age of nine in the workshop of his father, a joiner by trade. As well as being a keen guitarist, Alexander is a trained designer with an MA in fine art, and his passion for design led him towards a career in cabinet making – so this guitar is the result of three worlds colliding.

Building copies just isn't in Alexander's nature, but the one guitar designer to whom he readily admits a debt of gratitude is Bo Diddley, the man who dreamed up the rectangular Gretsch. In fact he even built a guitar for the great man, and they had arranged to meet, but ill health made Diddley cancel his tour.

As a player Alexander has always preferred the feel and sound of vintage instruments, so he tries to recreate those qualities in his own guitars. Although the shape of Blackspot guitars appears radical, this one is actually very practical. It's easy to reach all the way up to the 22nd fret and, believe it or not, it balances perfectly well in your lap if you prefer to play sitting down.

The body and the neck are both carved from American black walnut. I use the term 'carved' advisedly because each and every Blackspot guitar is hand-carved rather than CNC-routed... even the captive tenon neck joint. Although Alexander has base models, each guitar is essentially handmade, so it can be customised to the owner's specifications. This is the most 'basic' model – but basic doesn't mean 'crude'. It's an example of precision woodworking. The body is elegant and



Great headstock with ebony overlay, super-stylish lettering and a natty logo inlaid in pale blue malachite



You almost expect to find hi-tech knurled thumbwheel tuners, but the chrome Gotohs work well enough

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sleek with crisply chamfered edges, and you have to look very hard to spot the neck/body join. The fingerboard is dense ebony with no brown streaks or open grain, and all 22 frets are pressed in to near-perfection. In contrast the peghead overlay is macassar ebony with plenty of brown streaks, and it looks fantastic. The modernist Blackspot logo is inlaid in web malachite, and the company name is sprayed directly onto the wood.

If you ever feel like nitpicking when negotiating over the price of a guitar, the nut fit will usually give you room for manoeuvre. Unfortunately you won't get away with that on this guitar. It's fitted

and polished extremely well, and best of all, it's bone. When it comes to finishes, Alexander doesn't mince his words: 'The finish is thin nitrocellulose – time-consuming and expensive, but nothing sounds as good or ages as gracefully. In our opinion all other finishes are chosen on a purely cost basis'.

This SC's most obvious influence is the Gibson Les Paul Junior. The single pickup is a Bare Knuckle P90, made to Blackspot's custom specifications, and the controls are volume and tone. The tone circuit has a new old stock Jensen paper in oil capacitor. These things are very expensive and are also highly

FACTFILE

BLACKSPOT SC

Description: Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the UK

Price: £1750

Build: Black walnut body with set black walnut neck and 22-fret ebony fingerboard, Schaller wrapover tailpiece

Electrics: Single Bare Knuckle P90. Volume and tone controls

Left-hander: Yes

Finish: See website

Scale Length: 24.75"/630mm

Neck width:

Nut 41mm

12th fret 51mm

Depth of neck:

First fret 19mm

12th fret 22mm

String spacing:

Nut 35.5mm

Bridge 52mm

Action as supplied:

12th fret treble 2mm

12th fret bass 2.5mm

Weight: 3.4kg/7.5lbs

Contact: Blackspot

0117 9667225

www.blackspotguitars.com



THE COMPETITION

NATHAN SHEPHERD

5A Burl Maple
Another Bristol builder with a style of his own, plus a penchant for exotic timbers and some radical concepts
RRP: £1600

GIBSON

VOS '57 Les Paul Junior
Single P90, Mahogany body and set neck: a simple timeless classic
RRP: £1900

regarded by valve hi-fi enthusiasts. In keeping with the Junior theme the bridge is a Schaller design that combines tuneomatic saddles with a wrapover for the strings. All the hardware is chrome-plated, including the Gotoh sealed tuners.

The only cosmetic let down for the SC is the handmade copper sheet shielding tray lining the pickup cavity, but Alexander is unapologetic. He argues that any handmade guitar will have certain imperfections and individual quirks when compared to a CNC-routed factory produced guitar - and that indeed it should. I'd broadly agree with him, but ironically the wonky copper work is highlighted by the extremely high cosmetic standards throughout every other area of this guitar.

SOUNDS

Starting out unplugged as usual, you can really feel the neck and body of the SC vibrating as a whole. The treble strings are bright and cleanly defined, and the lows sound deep and fat. Best of all the SC is a very playable guitar with a grippy medium-depth neck that wouldn't seem out of place on a 1960s Gibson. The quality of the fret dress is also excellent, so there are no nasty buzzes or rattles, but the cast Gotoh tuners make the SC slightly neck-heavy.



Nice detailing, from the chromed knobs to the inset oval jack socket

The cranked tone is similar to an LP or SG Junior – it's raw, raunchy and dynamic, with a wonderfully thick, chewy midrange

Anybody who believes that a one pickup guitar has to be tonally limited should think again - especially when there's a decent P90 on board. Simply set your amp controls for a bright tone, then use the guitar's tone control to roll off enough treble to get your usual sound. Roll off a bit more treble for a neck-type sound, or open up things right up when you need a brighter Fender-like vibe. It's not rocket science and if you can operate a pickup selector, the chances are that you can handle a tone control, too.

The height of a P90 relative to the strings is crucial, because so much of this particular pickup's character comes from getting that wide, flat coil up close. With dogears - the P90s found on LP Juniors, ES-330s, ES-125s, etc - the only way to adjust the height is to use shims. The SC has an advantage because it has an adjustable soapbar-type P90.

When the review guitar arrived the pickup height was set relatively low. This produced a very open, chimey and transparent sound that was great for reedy Chicago blues tones and garagey rhythm duties but a bit underpowered for rock chords and lead work. A couple of twists of the pickup screws sorted that out and the SC really started to sing.

Unsurprisingly the cranked tone is similar to an LP or SG Junior. It's raw, raunchy and dynamic with a wonderfully thick, chewy midrange. However to my ears the SC has a more focused and defined tone, but less of that mahogany-induced harmonic complexity. Could that be the walnut body and neck, or the ebony board making its presence felt? I don't know, but I like it anyway.

VERDICT

Despite its undoubted sonic virtues, superb build standard and professional playability, the Blackspot SC will succeed or fail on its looks. Frankly, my opinion of the SC's visual virtues is irrelevant. For what it's worth I'm certainly charmed by it, and I think some of the other guitars in Blackspot's range look even better.

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality	18 / 20
Playability	17 / 20
Sound	17 / 20
Value for money	15 / 20
Vibe	17 / 20
TOTAL	84%
Good for... indie, rock, blues, jangle	
Look elsewhere... jazz and metal	



A suitably modern Schaller bridge and a UK-made Bare Knuckle P90